



# Review of UK Transnational Education in Malaysia: University of Southampton Malaysia

**October 2019**

## **Executive summary**

The University of Southampton Malaysia (UoSM) is a campus of the University of Southampton, run by a wholly owned subsidiary company of the University of Southampton (UK), USMC Sdn Bhd. The campus is located in Johor Bahru in Malaysia and is one of three UK Universities in Iskandar EduCity. The University established this branch campus in 2007, with its first cohort of students being recruited in 2012. UoSM now offers a range of Engineering programmes with transfer to Southampton for completion of degree studies. All of its provision has received full accreditation from the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). The campus aims to provide a high quality environment for its staff and students, while creating a vibrant and collaborative research culture.

The institutional processes for monitoring and reviewing quality and maintaining standards are effective and well understood by UoSM staff. The programmes are currently managed by Schools within the University's Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences. However, in line with its aims to expand the programme portfolio and introduce new delivery models, the University is in the process of approving a range of programmes in other disciplines, with completion opportunities on the Malaysia campus. Revised governance arrangements have been developed to accommodate this expansion. However, improved governance links between the campus and the University will be required for UoSM to be able to more fully engage in the wider University committee structure. The greater autonomy being provided to the Malaysian campus in managing the assessment of its planned new provision will also require the University to review its arrangements for Faculty oversight, the role of external examiners and its management of examination boards.

UoSM's students achieve strong degree outcomes compared to UK-based students, and high employment after graduation. This can partly be attributed to the support mechanisms in place at UoSM, which extend to the support for students transitioning from Malaysia to the UK campus.

The development of staff has been an important area of focus in the past two years. The University now has in place a well-structured staff development programme, involving travel to the UK campus, the undertaking of teaching qualifications and a range of other activities to support capacity development and to provide, wherever possible, for its students a higher education experience which is equivalent to that in the UK.

## Introduction

1 The University of Southampton (the University) established a branch campus in Iskandar EduCity, Johor Bahru in 2012, focusing on engineering provision. The campus opened to its first students in October 2012, as the University of Southampton Malaysia Campus (USMC), now known as the University of Southampton Malaysia (UoSM). It now offers programmes to nearly 250 students, with further plans for growth set out in its UoSM strategy. The UoSM building is not owned by the University, but efforts have been made to ensure that it has the look, feel and culture of a building at one of its UK sites.

2 The University's international vision is that it 'will be a leading global institution, enhanced by select high-value partnerships, with global reach in education and research that leads to real-world impact'. UoSM plays a key role in achieving this vision, through attracting students from across the globe, providing them with an international experience, expanding the University's international alumni community and also enhancing its international profile. The UoSM strategic plan was approved in July 2018, and centres around providing an excellent staff and student experience at the Malaysia campus, a high quality research environment, an expanded programme portfolio, a marketing and recruitment function that can delivery greater visibility and growth, and the development of more purposeful networks with government, other higher education institutions, corporates and alumni.

3 The programmes offered at UoSM are:

- Engineering Foundation Year (launched in 2014)
- MEng Mechanical Engineering (launched in 2012)
- MEng Electrical and Electronic Engineering (launched in 2013)
- MEng Aeronautics and Astronautics (launched in 2015).

4 UoSM delivers a Foundation Year to take students from Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level qualifications to the A Level standard necessary for entry into one of three undergraduate engineering programmes operated on a '2+2' model, with cohorts undertaking the first two years in Malaysia and then completing their studies in the UK. There are also a small number of PhD students based at UoSM, who receive supervision from supervisors both in Malaysia and the UK and undertake part of their studies in the UK. The University employs around 25 members of academic staff in Malaysia, supplemented annually by UK-based staff working on a 'flying faculty' basis.

5 The University plans to develop and grow its operations at UoSM through additional undergraduate provision offered on a '3+0' basis wholly in Malaysia, and growth in its PhD programme and research collaborations. This expansion is planned to introduce new programmes to the campus, in Computer Science, Business Management and Accounting and Finance. UoSM's business case for this expansion and the associated resource requirements to accommodate the new provision have been evaluated by its board and the University's Council. The University's Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) evaluate, on behalf of Senate, the delivery plans for new programmes. The students who met the review team expressed their general satisfaction with the current level of physical space and resources available, but commented on limitations in the availability of some resources for the number of students on campus. In planning for expansion, the University would benefit from a consultation exercise with its current students to support its identification of the physical investment priorities.

## Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

6 The University regards UoSM as having some of the characteristics of a collaborative partnership, with fewer of the risks represented by a collaboration with an external partner. It is therefore subject to some of the University's collaborative provision quality assurance procedures. UoSM is also registered with the Malaysian Ministry of Education, with the current registration due for renewal in October 2021. All of its undergraduate degree provision has received full accreditation from the MQA, and it also has recently received full accreditation to provide PhD level education.

7 UoSM's provision is currently managed through the School Programmes Committees of the School of Engineering and the School of Electronics and Computer Science, both in the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences. These committees oversee programme validation, external examiners, annual monitoring and assessment processes, and report to the University's AQSC, which has institutional oversight of quality assurance issues. However, with planned expansion of UoSM's portfolio into potential '3+0' provision, it is proposed that it takes more autonomy in academic governance issues, with its own Programmes Committee reporting directly to AQSC rather than through the relevant School committees.

8 In January 2018, UoSM was subject to a quinquennial periodic review with the AQSC approving UoSM for a further five years, along with associated recommendations for action that are regularly reviewed by AQSC. One recommendation emerging from the review was for the University to review governance of UoSM to gain greater clarity on where it fits in the University's structure, as concerns were raised over the lack of UoSM representation on University committees such as AQSC and Senate. The quinquennial review panel considered that UoSM staff should be given the opportunity to actively participate in the wider University committee structure to ensure that the operations and growth of UoSM are supported across the University and embedded in the decision-making processes at all levels.

9 Revised governance arrangements have been developed in response to the review, with a Senior Leadership Committee at UoSM advising the UoSM Chief Executive on strategic aspects, an Academic Advisory Board (AAB) (previously the Academic Affairs Committee) providing oversight of academic quality and learning and teaching, and a Student Experience Committee (SEC) to consider the non-academic student experience. School Programme/Discipline level Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) and Academic Liaison Groups provide input to the report to the AAB, SEC and Health and Safety Committee.

10 While this committee structure provides an effective means of governing UoSM at all levels of the campus, it provides a less effective means of interacting with the rest of the University. There are operational links between UoSM and the University at all levels, including the presence of the members of staff from UoSM on committees at School Programme Committees. UoSM reports into the University's governance structure through the Chief Executive Officer's membership of key committees including the University's Senate and AQSC. This does not allow UoSM to be fully included and engaged in decisions about the shape and future of the University at any other level than the Chief Executive.

11 The review team **recommends** that the University reconsiders the interaction between the governance arrangements of UoSM and the University, to allow in particular for the Academic Advisory Board, the Student Experience Committee and the Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee to interact with their equivalent committees in the UK. This

would allow for multiple representation of UoSM staff on University committees, thus improving two-way communications, increasing the opportunities for UoSM staff engagement and raising the profile of UoSM within the University and its students. The planned expansion of UoSM's provision, involving a wider variety of disciplines, greater research capability and less reliance on the relevant Faculties at the University, significantly increases the need for UoSM to be able to actively engage in the wider University committee structure.

12 UoSM cooperates with the other UK foreign university branch campuses located in Johor Bahru ('the UK3') and within Malaysia more generally ('the UK5').

## **Quality assurance**

### **Academic standards**

13 There are effective processes in place for programme approval, monitoring and revalidation. Academic standards and the quality of the student learning opportunities for programmes delivered by UoSM, are managed, monitored and reviewed through the standard internal processes of the University, as described in its Quality Handbook. As University of Southampton awards, the programmes are subject to the ongoing monitoring and enhancement requirements in the University's Quality, Monitoring and Enhancement Framework in the Quality Handbook. These are supplemented by a UoSM Operations Manual, which sets out the respective roles and responsibilities of staff at UoSM and at the main campuses of the University of Southampton in the UK for the effective delivery of the programmes taught at UoSM.

14 The relevant Southampton-based Schools are responsible for managing the programme validation and revalidation process, although with planned greater autonomy of UoSM then its own Programme Committees will take an increasingly leading role. Annual module reports are written by the relevant module lead at UoSM and submitted to the relevant UK-based module leader. Annual programme reports are completed by the Head of Academic Quality and Innovation and submitted to the relevant School Programme Committee, or UoSM Programmes Committee for future 3+0 provision. The Schools produce a School Programmes Report that references these reports which are considered by AQSC.

15 Quinquennial programme periodic review is currently led by programme teams at the University. The undergraduate engineering programmes have recently undergone revalidation, alongside the equivalent programmes in the UK. The process is managed and undertaken by the relevant School in the UK, with University Academic Links providing a source of input from the Malaysian campus. However, the review team observed minimal input from staff at UoSM, and so welcomes the University's plans to review the validation process to ensure that colleagues based in Malaysia, and at other collaborative partners, are more involved in the development process in advance of programme revalidation.

16 The University is also aware that the level of communication between module leads at the University and UoSM is variable, with, in some cases, leads at UoSM only discovering changes once they had been implemented in the UK. The planned review of the programme revalidation process should aim to improve general levels of communication at module and programme level, and the recommended review of governance arrangements should also help to keep the Malaysian campus updated on changes to the University's policies, regulations, and other developments.

## Assessment

17 There are currently effective processes in place for maintaining academic standards through assessment. The academic frameworks of the University, including external examining, ensure that academic standards are equivalent to those in the UK while programme content and assessment is contextualised to Malaysia. However, the greater autonomy being provided to the Malaysian campus in managing the assessment of its planned new provision will also require the University to review its arrangements for Faculty oversight, the role of external examiners and its management of examination boards to engender greater ownership by UoSM.

18 The University's Assessment Framework sets out the key principles that should be reflected in assessment practice, and the policies and procedures that must be followed in documenting and managing assessment across all University provision. The assessment strategy at programme-level is determined at validation and revalidation, and is common for the equivalent programmes in the UK and Malaysia.

19 Currently, the School in the UK is responsible for managing the assessment process, with individual assessments typically being set by UK-based module teams in consultation with UoSM-based module staff, but with the option for the Malaysian campus to be delegated lead responsibility. In-course assessment schedules are then coordinated wherever possible across the two campuses, and examinations at UoSM are timetabled to be sat simultaneously with those in the UK. Examination papers and coursework are marked at UoSM, with marked scripts sent to the University for moderation and external examiner review, in line with the University's Double-Blind Marking and Moderation Policy. However, with greater autonomy being provided to the Malaysian campus in managing the assessment of its planned '3+0' provision, the University may wish to consider the overseeing role that the relevant UK-based School should play in assuring the academic standards set and achieved in the programmes concerned.

20 The 2018 periodic review of UoSM noted that students were very complimentary about the timely and constructive feedback received on their academic work. Students who met the review team confirmed this to be the case, adding that module staff were accessible to offer one-to-one feedback on assessed work, in addition to the useful written feedback offered.

21 External examiners are appointed by UK-based Faculties, and have responsibility for both the UK and equivalent UoSM programmes to ensure consistency. UoSM provides samples of marked student scripts to the Faculties in the UK, who send them to the external examiners for review. However, only one current external examiner has visited the Malaysian campus, and the 2018 review panel noted that while there is no formal requirement for external examiners to visit the campus, external examiners should be given the opportunity. The review team welcomes the University's attempts to increase the opportunities for external examiners to visit the Malaysian campus, and encourages it to expand these opportunities as '3+0' programmes are developed and delivered. This would also provide external examiners with a greater opportunity to expand on what is currently a limited commentary on activities at the Malaysian campus in some annual reports, and may improve the current low awareness of the external examining system among students.

22 All examination boards are held in the UK, with the relevant UoSM staff being members and attending via Skype. However, the 2018 periodic review team was concerned that it can be difficult for UoSM staff to attend the Board of Examiners due to the timing of the Boards in the UK and/or the facilities available for videoconferencing in the rooms at Southampton used to hold the boards. The review team heard that some of these concerns

remain, and would encourage the University to ensure that examination board arrangements for future provision allows for the full engagement of relevant UoSM staff.

## Quality of learning opportunities

23 Student admissions are managed by UoSM, in accordance with the University's regulations for admissions to degree programmes, its admissions policies, and entry criteria approved by the Faculty, with any non-standard applicants being referred to the Faculty for a decision. It works with the University's Admissions Office to ensure that all applicants are recorded on the University's Student Record System.

24 UoSM offers an induction programme to all new students, covering a range of activities to inform them of their experience there. Students consider the programme to be very useful, and it is enhanced by the additional social activities offered by the Student Association.

25 The University claims to offer strong pastoral support for its students, creating a culture that has led to overwhelmingly high student satisfaction. The review team concurs with this view. All students have access to a UoSM academic member of staff as a Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) during their time at UoSM. Students consider PATs to be very accessible and helpful and are satisfied with the general level of academic and non-academic support. There is a close relationship between students and staff and an evident commitment of staff towards their students, which is supplemented by the supportive infrastructure provided through student societies. The 2018 periodic review of UoSM commended the dedication and enthusiasm of its Student Association in creating a strong sense of community and belonging for all UoSM students. The support mechanisms at UoSM, including the PAT system, the excellent staff-student relationship, the caring nature of staff and the student-initiated support mechanisms in place, are recognised as a **positive feature** by the review team.

26 UoSM have access to the services of a certified counsellor who is shared with the University of Reading Malaysia Campus, to run sessions on dealing with such matters as exam stress and to provide counselling for any students as required. However, students who met the review team were not aware of this service, and Student Handbooks do not make reference to it. The University is advised to more clearly signpost students to this helpful service.

27 There is also comprehensive induction of students transferring to the UK. Students receive key information to prepare them for their transition while at UoSM, supported by PATs and UK staff who teach in Malaysia. Once in the UK, formal induction, a buddy scheme and a UK-based PAT are all in place to support students, again complemented by a student-initiated peer support system. The transition of students from Malaysia to UK, in terms of the support offered both in Malaysia and when they arrive in the UK, are recognised as a **positive feature** by the review team. Strong degree outcomes compared to UK-based students and high employment after graduation are both indicators of a student body who are well integrated into their studies in the UK.

28 Student handbooks identify how students are able to engage in the quality of their experience. The UoSM Student Association organises the election of student representatives for each programme who are members of SSLC, which reports directly to the Academic Advisory Board. Online module surveys take place at UoSM, in line with University policy, with results being considered by the SSLC, and where relevant by SEC and AAB, where student representatives have the opportunity to discuss specific issues raised and actions taken.

29 UoSM students have access to the same level of online learning materials as those on the equivalent programmes in the UK, distributed via the virtual learning environment. The library stock is small but proportionate to the number of students currently studying at UoSM. While staff and students are generally happy with the learning resources and facilities available for the current provision at UoSM, some have raised concerns that the plans to recruit substantially more students could impact on the quality of delivery and the student experience. The University has developed a business case for future estates and resources requirements in planning for expansion to ensure a comparable quality of experience for all students at the Malaysian campus, which should take into account feedback from staff and students (see paragraph 5).

30 The 2018 periodic review of UoSM recommended that the University clarify the development and career opportunities for its staff, including opportunities for staff to engage with counterparts at the University and for UoSM to make comprehensive online and face-to-face training available on all aspects of quality assurance, policies, procedures and regulations. The development of staff has been an important area of focus since then. As part of their induction, a significant proportion of UoSM staff visit the UK for a short period and most have also undertaken the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, which is accredited to provide Fellowship status with Advance HE (FHEA). Ongoing staff development is met through peer observation of teaching, access to video recordings and other learning materials in the UK, internal research seed funding and contribution to the Educators' Conference on learning and teaching organised by local UK universities. The University also makes full use of Malaysia's Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) to support capacity development. These staff development opportunities are recognised as a **positive feature** by the review team.

## Information on higher education provision

31 UoSM has a marketing team led by its Head of Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing. This team works closely with the University marketing and communications team to draft and sign off the UoSM Prospectus each year, with final approval from the UoSM Chief Executive Officer after feedback from the Deputy Heads of School (Education) and the Programme Teams in the UK and Malaysia. Other marketing publications, materials and content are generated at UoSM and signed off by the Head of Recruitment, Marketing and Student Recruitment.

32 Students are made aware of University regulations, policies and procedures that apply to their programme through their student handbook and at induction, in addition to a range of information on the support available to them, how their programme will be taught and assessed and student engagement opportunities. Programme specifications are based on those for the equivalent UK programme, contextualised for the Malaysian variant, and student handbooks are based on a University template, again contextualised with local information.

33 Certificates and Diploma Supplements are produced by the Exams, Awards and Graduation Team in the UK. The Diploma Supplement states that learning was undertaken at both Southampton and Malaysia campuses.

## Conclusion

The University of Southampton Malaysia campus has a well-established reputation, through attracting well-qualified students and providing them with a high quality international experience. In particular, the University offers its students at the campus a supportive

environment in which to study, with staff who are developed to provide wherever possible a higher education experience which is equivalent to that in the UK.

The University plans to develop and grow its operations in Malaysia through additional undergraduate provision, including in new disciplines offered on a '3+0' basis and growth in its research provision. Consequently, the University will need to reconsider its arrangements for interaction between the governance arrangements of UoSM and the University, and its arrangements for setting and maintaining academic standards through assessment.

## **Positive features**

The following positive features are identified:

- The support mechanisms in place at UoSM, including the PAT system and enhanced by the excellent staff-student relationship, the caring nature of staff and the student-initiated support mechanisms (paragraph 25).
- The transition of students from Malaysia to UK, in terms of the support offered both in Malaysia and when they arrive in the UK (paragraph 27).
- Staff development opportunities for UoSM staff (paragraph 30).

## **Recommendations**

The University of Southampton is recommended to take the following action:

- To reconsider, in light of planned expansion, the interaction between the governance arrangements of UoSM and the University and approaches to setting and maintaining academic standards through assessment (paragraph 11).



### **University of Southampton's response to the review report**

The University of Southampton welcomes the outcome of QAA's review of University of Southampton Malaysia, and is pleased the review team has recognised the excellent support we offer our students both in Malaysia and on their transition to the UK. Our governance arrangements in Malaysia and Southampton were already under review and this report will further inform our thinking on this subject.

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